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RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 8297  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 5798  
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO 0514  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000086

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/17/2018

TAGS: PREL PTER OREP CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION STIRRING  
DEBATE IN SRI LANKA

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Recent comments by US Presidential candidates Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama have been a catalyst for open discussion over what the US presidential election will mean for Sri Lanka. Tamil press and politicians have generally favored the perceived nuanced position of the leading Democratic candidates, believing that a Democratic victory would allow the LTTE to be viewed more as freedom fighters and less as traditional terrorists. Sinhalese editorials and politicians, on the other hand, have worried that a Democratic win in November could lead to a revamping of US policy towards Sri Lanka, and a harsher view of the GSL's military campaign against the Tigers. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Recent comments by US Presidential candidates Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama have stirred open debate in the press and amongst politicians over what the US Presidential election could mean for US policy towards Sri Lanka. The flurry of interest began when Senator Clinton told the UK's 'The Guardian' newspaper in a late October interview that all terrorist groups should not be treated equally, but rather in a nuanced fashion. Clinton noted that it was not possible to place all terrorists in the same category; some terrorist groups such as the LTTE were fighting for political goals. Senator Obama commented in an early January interview reported on Tamilnet, that many countries, including Sri Lanka, suffered from an inability to accommodate different types of communities in their societies.

¶3. (C) Predictably, some in the Tamil and Sinhalese communities have sought to use the Senators' comments for their own political advantage. K.V. Balakumaran, a senior member of LTTE's political wing, noted to a Tamil television program that Senator Clinton's comments could possibly indicate an on-going policy review within the US government. Editorials by Sinhalese authors, on the other hand, have used the Senators' comments to warn that a Democratic administration could prove disastrous for the GSL. One

editorial in the prominent Daily Mirror newspaper went so far as to wonder whether the LTTE's terrorist designation would be under jeopardy if either Clinton or Obama were to win the Presidency.

¶4. (C) Politicians have tended to view the ongoing debate in the press through the prism of their political parties. UNP MP Ravi Karunayake told poloff that he welcomed the comments by Senator Clinton and Senator Obama because he felt that they reflected the "more nuanced position of the UNP." A.M.M. Faaiz, Chairman of the Muslim Peace Secretariat, noted that while Muslims did not have a view on the debate given their marginal status in Sri Lankan politics, he believed that the LTTE was simply buying time till a new administration changed US policy towards Sri Lanka. JVP Secretary-General Tilvin Silva told the Embassy that the JVP

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did not have an official position on the ongoing debate as the JVP did not believe in interference in another country's affairs.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: While the US Presidential election probably remains far from the minds of average Sri Lankans, it has recently been prominent in the minds of political elites on both sides of the ethnic war and the press within the country, especially within Colombo. Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa, himself an American citizen, has mentioned to Ambassador on several occasions that he is closely following the early electoral contests. His close watch of US politics appears to reflect a concern amongst some Sinhalese that a new administration could take a harsher view of the GSL's military campaign. The Tamil presses' drumming up of the Senators' comments appear to reflect a hopeful sentiment that US policy towards the LTTE will shift

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in the near future.  
BLAKE